

Herod – Dynasty of Despots

In 1996 I was the speaker at a conference in Austria. As a passing comment I mentioned a news item I had heard just before leaving the United States for Europe. It claimed that “born-again Christians” were the single largest voting bloc in the 1996 presidential election. One man in the audience began to clap loudly and kept clapping; he was the only one. Almost everyone in that particular session was American. He was from Croatia, a country that had suffered political oppression and turmoil for generations. He appreciated the concept of Christians having a say in government while the Americans took it for granted.

It’s hard for us to imagine not having a voice in our government. It’s hard to imagine generation after generation of oppressive government we could do nothing about. No vote; no opportunity for protest or change.

Do you think it would be better or worse to be a Christian under such unfavorable political circumstances?

Almost all of the New Testament events took place under the dynasty of the Herods. They were absolutely amazing. Their leadership was marked by greed, murder, intrigue, incest and the worst of political corruption. They provided the political context for the birth of Jesus, his early childhood, his public ministry, his death, burial and resurrection and the phenomenal growth of the Christian church.

But, you say, “Wait a minute. What about the Romans? Weren’t they in charge?” Well, yes and no. The Romans conquered Jerusalem at the end of a three-month siege in the autumn of 63 BC. It was then that the Roman general, Pompey, entered the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem and desecrated it. The long era of Roman rule had begun. But the very next day Pompey ordered the temple cleansed and worship of God restored. The Romans were amazingly respectful of the religions and customs of many of the nations they conquered, including Israel.

Part of the Roman strategy was to allow a measure of home-rule under the overall authority of the Roman emperor and senate. The highest rank granted was “king”. A person could be a king under the Roman government and have tremendous power, although it wasn’t absolute power. There were required reports back to Rome and if things did not go well then those kings could quickly be replaced.

It was in this backdrop that Antipater, a man from Jewish heritage, attached himself to Julius Caesar in 48 BC when Caesar defeated the Roman General Pompey in Egypt. Antipater risked his life for Caesar in Egypt so Caesar rewarded him with full Roman citizenship, lifetime tax exemption and a job as procurator of Judea.

Antipater appointed one of his sons as the governor of

Galilee. That son’s name was Herod. He was only 25 years old when he became the governor of Galilee. It was the beginning of an astonishing political career that lasted for more than 43 years. It eclipses modern soap operas as to the awful things that were done. Let me give you a few examples.

Herod did become very popular with the people. Sometimes. He ruthlessly defeated and killed his enemies and that ultimately brought peace to his province. People were grateful for that. He was a significant builder; he actually built whole cities. And he periodically lowered taxes as much as 1/3 to gain political favor and support.

The temple in Jerusalem was built under his orders and authority although it was not completed until long after his death. Every story about the temple in the New Testament refers to “Herod’s Temple” in Jerusalem. It was so magnificent that the rabbis claimed, “He who has not seen the temple of Herod has never seen a beautiful building.”

Personally, his life was a mess. He had ten wives, but not all at the same time. When a wife fell into disfavor he would either divorce her or have her executed and then marry someone else. He fathered several children by most of his wives and there was strong competition among his sons as to who would succeed him in this powerful position. It was his privilege to name his successor as long as the government in Rome agreed to it and so he named his successor in his will. However, he wrote six different wills and named different successors in each will.

When Herod suspected anyone of disloyalty or competition he would maneuver to have that person eliminated. He distrusted his wives so when he went on business trips he routinely left behind written instructions that if he died while away his wife was to be murdered. His wife Alexandra and her son Aristobulus tried to escape Herod

by hiding in coffins being shipped to Egypt. He rewarded Aristobulus by inviting him to his resort in Jericho and going for a swim where they were roughhousing in the water and Aristobulus’ head was held under water for a little too long.

Herod switched political loyalties to align with whoever was in power in Rome. He murdered his wives, his children, his

enemies and his friends. It is no wonder that shortly before his death he did what is recorded in Matthew 2:1-18:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

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When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem of Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

" 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time that the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Typical Herod. When he was threatened by a newborn child, even though he was nearing his own death and knew it, he ordered the slaughter of every boy baby aged two and under.

And what about Joseph? Should he have run away? Why didn't he stay and fight? After all, God was on his side. Why didn't he just pray and believe? Why didn't God send some of those same angels back to zap Herod? Why should God in heaven and the Son on earth be threatened and have their eternal strategies influenced by a jealous dictator who was afraid of a baby born in Bethlehem?

I find an important Christian principle for politics in the action of Jesus' family: *at times the best reaction is to*

retreat. Not every battle is worth fighting. Some goals are more important than defeating a sick old man even if his name is Herod the Great. Jesus had a mission: to save the world. His destiny was the cross. He and his family were willing to become refugees in a distant land and let an evil enemy win one round in order to fulfill the greater purpose.

This is not the principle for every issue. Sometimes, as we shall see, it is best to stop and fight. The key question is: "What is most important?"

I am convinced that as Christians we share the mission of Jesus Christ. What is most important to us is not always the current political or social issue but the ultimate issue of human spiritual destiny. At the end of life when God asks, "What did you do?" I don't want my answer to be the outcome of passing issues but the winning of humankind to Jesus Christ for eternity.

Now please don't misunderstand what is here being said. This is not to say that Christians should not be engaged in the political arena. To the contrary, we should be involved. But we also should be smart enough and godly enough to discern which battles to fight and which battles we should walk away from.

Herod the Great died not long after the flight of Jesus and his family. He knew he was dying so he went to his resort in Jericho and invited all leaders of his kingdom to come. When they all arrived he had them locked up in the hippodrome with instructions that the moment he died they were all to be executed. Herod knew that the people had come to hate him and would probably celebrate his death. This way he would guarantee massive mourning across the nation because of the deaths of all the leaders, including him!

While he was giving these horrible orders he received a message from Rome. He had requested permission to execute another of his sons, Antipater. Permission was granted from Rome, and even though he was at death's door, he had another of his sons killed.

Five days before his death, Herod wrote his sixth and final will. In it he divided up his kingdom between two of his own brothers and one of his sons, Archelaus.

If you were to take time to read Herod's biography you would be astounded and offended by almost every page. He was an evil man. But perhaps the most telling line in his biography says that his rule was not much different from the other politicians and rulers of his day. In other words, Jesus was born into an era of insane political corruption and evil.

Archelaus continued the Herod family dynasty, ruling for the next ten years. He continued his father's ambitious building programs and maintained his father's ruthless and oppressive style.

His reign was comparatively brief and his appearance in the Bible is also short. In Matthew 2:19-23 we are told:

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,

“Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: “He will be called a Nazarene.”

Once again God had warned Joseph to protect Jesus at all cost. There is no hint that Archelaus even knew about Jesus. He probably had never heard about the slaughter of the baby boys in Bethlehem. He never did anything to directly harm the holy family. Nevertheless, every precaution was to be taken to protect and preserve Jesus to fulfill his mission from God.

Joseph moved the family to Nazareth where they would probably be safe. Listening to the warning and direction of God was more important than returning to a previous address. It is another example of political passivity. No confrontation. Get out of harm’s way. There was a greater good to be accomplished. Avoid all unnecessary risks.

Archelaus alienated just about everybody. The people turned against him. His own family petitioned Rome to remove him. The Romans banished him to France and he never returned to Israel again. In other words, God took care of him and got him out of the way. That is a lesson many Christians have learned—when subjected to an evil government that they cannot overthrow, God can be trusted to intervene and do it for them.

Archelaus’ brother, Antipas, succeeded him to the throne. Antipas ruled Galilee during the three years of Jesus’ public ministry and appeared most prominently in the New Testament. When you read about Herod in the time of Jesus—during the time of his miracles and his preaching—it was Herod Antipas to whom it is referring.

In AD 29 Antipas traveled to Rome. Along the way he stopped to spend a few days at the home of his brother Philip. While there he fell in love with his hostess and sister-in-law Herodias, who was also his niece. They entered into an adulterous affair. She preferred to be married to Antipas so they both agreed to get divorces and marry each other.

What would you think of a politician who divorced his wife in order to marry someone else? What do you think of politicians who commit adultery? When Newsweek Magazine did a cover story on adultery I was one of the people they interviewed. The reporter asked, “What is

wrong with adultery?” I told that reporter that adultery is not primarily a sexual sin; it is primarily a breaking of trust, a shattering of vows. It is an affront to God and to the person to whom you are married.

My guess is that those comments sound inappropriate in our culture, but they are consistent with the comments of a preacher named John the Baptist who publicly condemned the adultery, divorce and marriage of Herod Antipas. The story is in Mark 6:17-29:

Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

The king said to the girl, “Ask me for anything you want, and I’ll give it to you.” And he promised her with an oath, “Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom.”

She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?”

“The head of John the Baptist,” she answered.

At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: “I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”

The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother.

There is another political lesson for us. Sometimes we must stand against what is wrong and choose our convictions and determine our behavior based on God’s standards rather than on the fleeting and changing circumstances of our culture and society.

Antipas killed John the Baptist just as his father had

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killed the babies in Bethlehem. When he threatened to kill Jesus the threat had to be taken seriously. Jesus' response is recorded in Luke 13:31-33:

At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you."

(Jesus) replied, "Go tell that fox, "I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal. In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside of Jerusalem!"

Jesus was ready to die. He was on his way to Jerusalem. He was nearing what he had come to do. He was not going to be distracted by a despot's threats. Another time the answer was to flee to Egypt; this time the answer was to surge ahead. Jesus had the direction of God.

How significant! God wants us to have different responses to different problems and different threats. It is critically important that we as Christians have our ears attuned to God so that we can understand what is the right response in those different situations.

Jesus and Herod Antipas were destined to meet face to face. It was in the final hours of Jesus' life. He was being tried before Pilate and the Roman governor didn't want to deal with Jesus. He had a long history of conflicts with Herod. Since Herod was visiting Jerusalem and Jesus was from his province, Pilate decided to transfer jurisdiction of the difficult "Jesus case" to Herod. The meeting between Jesus and Herod is recorded in Luke 23:6-12:

On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. When he heard that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that time.

When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him. From what he had heard about him, he hoped to see him perform some miracle. He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, they sent him back to Pilate. That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies.

Herod more than met his match. He could question Jesus but he could not make him answer. He could mock Jesus but not steal his dignity. He could order Jesus to perform miracles, but not make Jesus do anything he didn't want to do. No threat, no offer, could convince Jesus to misuse the powers that were his.

Herod Antipas gave up. He did not have the moral, political or personal strength to deal with Jesus Christ. He sent him back to Pilate.

Antipas was deposed by the emperor Caligula and ex-

iled to southern France. His successor was another Herod named Philip who is never mentioned in the Bible and was succeeded by another grandson of Herod the Great named Agrippa I.

Herod Agrippa followed the evil patterns of his family dynasty. He became a vile persecutor of Christians. His story is a major one in the book of Acts. You can read in Acts 12:1-4 how he persecuted the early Christians. He had St. James executed and was on his way to execute St. Peter. But God was not going to let the gospel or the church be stopped by this latest Herod. He went so far as to send an angel to painfully take away the life of this evil king.

In Acts 12:19b-24 we have another great political and spiritual lesson. God will allow persecution, suffering and even death - - - but he will not allow his message of eternal salvation to be stopped. God is populating heaven and preparing people for eternity. He will not let any earthly politician stop his plan.

Around the world today Christians are concluding that their loyalty is to God not to a country, government or political leader. They see that God can and will use politics and social issues for his purposes and that God's purposes are what matter most. In China, Sudan and the Middle East there are Christians who are on their knees asking God for direction on how to respond Christianly and faithfully to the problems of society and the despots who rule over them. Interestingly, the church is often strongest and the number of Christians is growing more quickly where there is opposition to the gospel than where there is political and religious freedom.

For Americans this means that we should be deeply grateful for the privileges we have. It means that we should take full advantage of what we have—not so much for our personal gain as for the cause of Jesus Christ. It means that the greatest issue is that we follow the mind and mission of Jesus and not the political winds of good and evil. It is saying that more than anything else we are Christians who trust God for what is good and right regardless of what the government says or does. We are Christians first and foremost and we will interpret everything from current events to the personal happenings of our lives in terms of what they mean in our following of Jesus Christ as his disciples.

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